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Literature in the time of *Tokhang*

Abstract: With the devastating war on drugs in the Philippines threatening to escalate into a war on words, Filipino writers need to fight terror with truthful writing that goes beyond posterised caricature to give evil a human face. This paper was originally delivered as the keynote address at the annual conference of the Writers Union of the Philippines at the Ateneo de Manila University on 29 April 2017.

Biographical Note: Jose Dalisay Jr., PhD has published over thirty books of fiction and nonfiction and teaches English and creative writing at the University of the Philippines, where he also serves as Vice President for Public Affairs. He has been a Fulbright, Hawthornden, David TK Wong, Rockefeller, and Civitella Ranieri fellow. His second novel, *Soledad's Sister*, was shortlisted for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007.

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I've been asked to speak on the subject of literature in the time of Tokhang and I'm sure we all agree that no topic could be timelier and more troubling. I suspect I was chosen to stand here today much less for any eloquence than for the simple fact that, even peripherally, my family can count personal losses in this sordid war. As many of you know, I wrote a piece for *Esquire* magazine in September 2016 recounting a horrific moment that no family should ever have to undergo. Let me just read a paragraph from that essay:

> My wife Beng and I were in San Diego late this July, visiting family and taking in the harmless lunacy of Comic-Con, when we received the numbing news that Lauren Kristel Rosales, the girlfriend of Beng's nephew Gab, had been shot dead by a man as she was taking a jeepney ride to work. We found a picture online of Lauren slumped face down on the floor of the jeep, clutching her bag, and it was the most heartbreaking sight I'd seen, the pain of which Beng's wails could only scratch at. I'd come across ghastlier crime scenes as a sometime police reporter, but this one hit home and hit hard; she was someone we knew and cared for, someone who occasionally dropped by with Gab and whom we shared Christmas lunches with. We had flown to the US for a family vacation and were flying home to a family funeral (Dalisay, 2016).

As if this wasn't terrible enough, three months after Lauren was murdered, her brother JR—a newlywed young man who had flown home from his job in the UK to pursue his sister's case—was shot dead by a motorcycle-riding gunman, who remains unknown, like his sister's assailant, to this day.

To be fair—a word that seems hopelessly inappropriate in these circumstances—no one except the killers and their handlers can say for sure if these murders were part of *Oplan Tokhang*, the government's so-called war on drugs. Neither was a drug user, and the police admit that neither Lauren nor JR was on their list of suspects. But these murders happened in an environment and in a manner that, as crime waves and police campaigns typically do, anonymised both victims and perpetrators, and tossed them all into a wide-mouthed meat grinder that crushed not only flesh and bone but guilt and innocence together.

The term *tokhang* is a corrupted word, a portmanteau of the Cebuano words *toktok* and *hangyo*, or 'knock' and 'plead'—the very embodiment of courtesy and consideration, conjuring the image of a uniformed policeman, his cap in hand, knocking on the door of a suspect's home and politely seeking information or cooperation. In practice, *tokhang* has become its opposite; the gentle knock has become the kick of a booted heel, the cap a gun, and the appeal a barked command.

As writers and storytellers, we have to marvel not only at the terminal efficiency of this process, but also at the facility with which this brief narrative arc has become a cliché—and like all clichés has left us increasingly benumbed and unsurprised. In a sense, this is the true victory of the war on drugs—the capture of the passive mind and its habituation to systematic terror.

As our friend and fellow writer Fr. Albert Alejo put it, *'Sanayan lang ang pagpatay*—you get used to killing.' We've gotten used not only to the killings but to the stories about them, to the telling and to the listening. And we all know by now how that basic story runs: Juan was a drug addict, so the police went to arrest him but he resisted and was therefore shot and killed—probably the fifth or the sixth encounter of its kind in a long day's war waged by the noble agents of the law against crime and evil. In this

situation, what can writers who have not surrendered their conscience and their writerly inquisitiveness do?

Writers come in many forms and functions, which at one time or other may overlap. In this audience, here today, there are not only fictionists, poets, playwrights and essayists but also journalists, editors, copywriters, screenwriters, bloggers, and propagandists of all kinds and persuasions. What unites us is the written word—and increasingly, these days, the visible image.

I often tell foreign audiences that we Filipinos can be very proud of our writers and literary resources. We have one of the world's freest presses and social media, where no topic and no personage is taboo. But this is accompanied by an awful irony: for all our vaunted liberties, the Philippines is also one of the deadliest countries for journalists in the world—according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, it ranked second only to Iraq in 2013. We have only to think of Maguindanao to remember and understand that, politically, it is the frontline journalist who takes the greatest risks and sustains the most grievous losses in the battle for the Filipino mind.

By comparison, we fictionists and poets have it easy. Politicians read newspapers, not novels; bureaucrats and generals can't understand Cirilo Bautista and Gemino Abad (and I'm not sure I do, either). Creative writing hardly pays us anything but we can say whatever we want and reasonably expect to stay alive and ambulant. Nobody in this country ever got killed or imprisoned in recent times because of a novel or a story. Neither has a Filipino despot been deposed because of a play or a poem. Journalism, on the other hand, can be a lethal enterprise, especially if you live and work far away from the glare of the metropolis.

It's worth noting, of course, that we have brought down three presidents—Marcos, Estrada, and Arroyo—by means of media other than print. The massive street revolt that drove Ferdinand Marcos away in 1986 was called for on radio; the movement that hounded Joseph Estrada out of office in 2001 ballooned over SMS; Gloria Arroyo's disgraceful behavior in 2005 went viral on the Internet. I fearlessly predict that the next Philippine revolution—whenever that will be and for whatever cause—will not be sparked by a novel but by a viral video. But again, between now and then, what's a writer to do?

It's become almost a cliché in itself to say that a writer's first responsibility is to the truth. This is no truer than today, in this age of fake news, post-truths, and alternative facts. Someone has to figure out what really happened, who's lying, and why. The fact that we respond to the news today mostly with consternation and skepticism only shows how difficult that task is, and how successful and how good the professional purveyors of lies, half-truths, and nuanced positions are at their job. Call them trolls, call them spin doctors—and yes, call them spokespersons—but whatever their motives are, whether they may be mercenaries or true believers, they have raised the bar for their white-hat counterparts.

The easiest and perhaps most attractive role to take as an antagonist is that of a propagandist, especially online—to respond tweet for tweet, post for post, insult for insult, meme for meme. But the harder and therefore the more important task is to see beyond the moment and to engage the reader on a deeper and more thoughtful level. Clearly we need investigative journalists with the courage, integrity, and tenacity to uncover the facts. Clearly we need scholars and critics who can sift through the facts

and data to make sense of this cleverly contrived and well-implemented confusion. For these writers, their mission is much more obvious. But what can the rest of us, who know nothing but to write stories, poems, plays, and essays, do?

Propagandists employ the broad strokes of caricature, and there's a time and place for that. But beyond propaganda, beyond memes and *hugot* lines, I submit that the creative writer's true task is to do as we have always done, which is to go beyond the simple and the obvious to get at the truth of life—the complicated truth, the inconvenient truth, the truth that will drive evil out of the shadows into the withering light. And by this I don't mean just establishing the facts, although that is difficult and deserving enough. I mean the persistent affirmation of our worth and our infinite complexity as humans against the political powers that seek to oversimplify and dehumanise people by affixing labels of convenience on their bloodied chests.

This we know as writers: life is complex; people are complex. The most trustworthy-looking person can tell a lie; the most damnable crook can tell the truth. Our poems and stories return to this premise over and over again; things are never what they seem. Fiction is all about character revelation and transformation. Poetry dissects one moment into many. What others accept as conclusions, we take as beginnings. Our lodestar is our natural curiosity and skepticism, without which we merely echo what others have already said, and blindly accept the official narrative. The two most important words in our verbal armory are not even 'truth' or 'justice—it's 'what if?'And this is how we must respond to the stereotyping, the homogenisation, and the dehumanisation of people that takes place in a time of terror—to rescue and preserve the individuality and humanity not only of the victims but also of their killers, because even evil must have a recognisable face. Fight the cliché. Resist the simple story. Refuse to be idiotised.

In the American Literature class I taught this semester, we took up three classic short stories that we could learn from. (Not incidentally, whenever I teach American literature, I always make a point of reminding my students that we are studying the subject not to become Americans, but to become better Filipinos by replacing our awe of that country with critical understanding.) These three stories are 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson, in which a whole town gets together in an act of communal murder; 'Good Country People' by Flannery O'Connor, in which a Bible salesman is revealed to be a perverted cynic and 'Going to Meet the Man' by James Baldwin, in which a Sunday picnic turns out to be the backdrop for the gruesome lynching of a black man.

These stories suggest to me that in the not too distant future, our own great stories, novels, and films will emerge out of this dark and turbulent period. We need a 'Lottery' and a 'Good Country People' and a 'Going to Meet the Man' for our time and place. And when they get written, the story will no longer be just that of the rogue police going after innocent citizens, but also that of our collective complicity in it, in our people's acceptance of extrajudicial killings as the norm. The biggest casualties of this present war have been justice and conscience.

I will concede that the war on drugs is a popular war and that much of that popularity derives from the fact that drugs have destroyed many lives while enriching others. But as writers, we have to remind our people and our government that there are things far worse than drugs, and that the most powerful narcotic of all is the lust for power. Not all of us can be investigative journalists or soul-searching novelists. But I will consider that even the conscious assertion of life and beauty against a backdrop of death and terror can be an act of political resistance.

During the Second World War, when Leningrad was under siege by the German army and the Russians had resorted to eating leather belts, cats and dogs and even flesh from corpses, a group of starving musicians came together to premiere Dmitri Shostakovich's 7th Symphony. They played it on the radio and even the Germans could not believe what they were hearing. The records say that after the war, captured German officers admitted that it was when they heard 'The Leningrad', as the 7th Symphony became known, that they knew they could never defeat the city. (Stolvarova, 2004)

So our art, my friends, is what keeps us alive, and what keeps us human. Our art is our faith, the faith that will sustain us through our doubts and fears. As Leo Tolstoy reminds us, 'God sees the truth, but waits.' Only God knows when to impose justice upon the deserving. Meanwhile, we writers can serve as his eyes, his witnesses, keeping our faith in him, in our art, and in each other, praying for truth and justice to ultimately prevail.

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